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Dutch Language and Literature in the United States

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Introduction

Few will be surprised to learn that the Dutch language was still used in North America after the death of Petrus Stuyvesant. Less widely known is the fact that spoken Dutch remained in use far longer than people generally assume, although the production of literary texts appears to have been limited. From a linguistic perspective it is important to examine how Dutch developed in North America. Such considerations invite comparison with another language descended from a form of "colonial Dutch" – Afrikaans – but by necessity that subject remains beyond the scope of this essay.

What might have happened if, late in the summer of 1664, the Dutch had not handed New Amsterdam over to the English and had succeeded in repelling English attacks, is fascinating to consider. The United States might have become a colony of the Netherlands, with Dutch as its official language. Millions of Americans would have spoken Dutch instead of English. This flight of fancy is also tellingly illustrated in the widespread myth that, during the American Revolution, a single vote in the state of New York supposedly made the difference between "the whole of America" speaking Dutch rather than English. Actually, there are various versions of this myth: the same one-vote difference has been attributed to other languages.

The final loss of Dutch authority over New Netherland in 1674 did not spell the end of Dutch as a language in North America. In 1788, it was still of sufficient importance to warrant a swift translation into Dutch of the first constitution of the newly established United States, in hopes of drumming up support among the Dutch colonists.[1] When in the 1820s the Dutch pastor Gerardus Balthazar Bosch (1794-1837) visited Albany as well as Hoboken, NJ, and heard Dutch spoken [167] wherever he went, he expressed surprise that "the Dutch language [had] survived in North America for so long." However, he went on to add that this Dutch had become so "poor, clumsy and coarse" that it would be no great loss if it were no longer spoken. People at the time estimated that this language death would occur around 1850. In fact, it did not take place until almost a century later, and Jaap van Marle recently stated that "during the first decades of the twentieth century there were still people around who were fluent in so-called Low Dutch."[2] Bosch's observations lead to questions on the development of the Dutch that was spoken in the colony of New Netherland during the first half of the seventeenth century to the variant that the he heard at the market in New York in 1825. Anyone who plans to study "older American Dutch," as it is referred to in the literature, will have to take into account that in the second half of the twentieth century a number of American-Dutch texts appeared that turned out to be falsifications, a phenomenon that, according to Van Marle, has also occurred in other languages. Another problem when studying the development of New Netherland Dutch (or *Laeg Duits* as it was called by later generations) is the size of the material that served as a basis for the most important study of American Dutch to date, a corpus of some two hundred "New York Dutch" documents that was

analyzed in the early 1970s.[3] By current standards this corpus is modest. As regards literary language, most of what has been passed down to us consists of a number of poems from the second half of the seventeenth century and it is questionable whether their language use differed from that in the Netherlands at that time; in all likelihood it did not. Beyond this point, Dutch in North America, as far as we know, seems to have ceased as a language for literary expression.

American Dutch: Disappearance and Change

Since the foundation of the colony, Dutch – as the language of the West India Company – was used for administrative purposes, poetry, and religion. It continued to serve as the language of the pulpit in some areas until the early nineteenth century – the last standard sermon in Dutch was held in 1833. The years between 1640 and 1690 are regarded as the "formative years" of New Netherland Dutch: from 1640 on, the Dutch contingent that had settled in this new region was large enough to enable a new variant of Dutch to begin developing. Dutch in North America therefore had half a century to flourish and gain a firm foothold.[4]

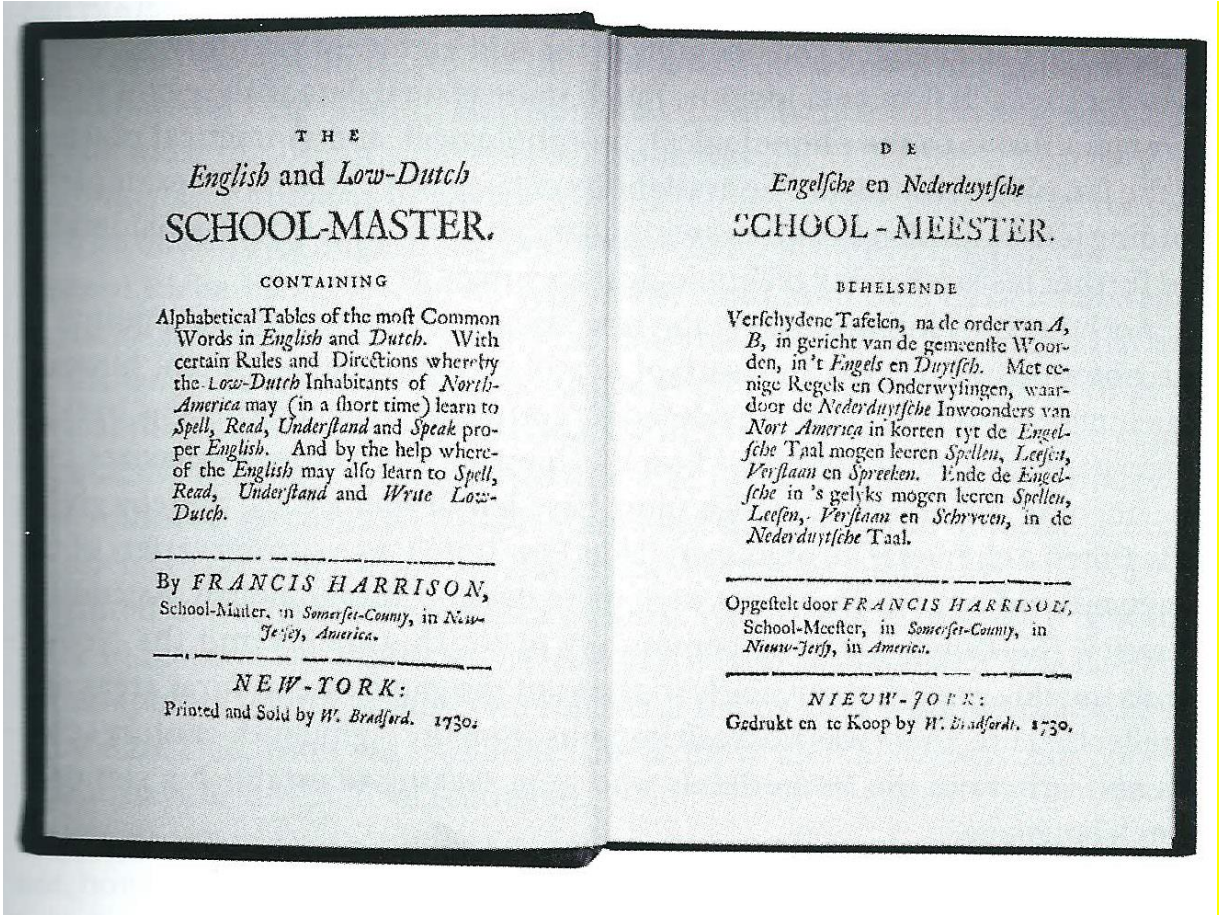
Around 1664, the colony had between seven and eight thousand inhabitants, including a number for whom Dutch was not the native language, such as the British, the Germans, the Scandinavians, and the French. It is interesting to note that foreign employees of the West India Company were quick to switch to [168] Dutch, which was the lingua franca that offered them the desired access to the colonial social structures. As sociolinguistic research from recent decades has taught us, social status and prestige are far more decisive factors in constructing a language than the number of speakers. What is more, there was no competition with a widely spoken language such as French: contact with the northern French border territory of Québec remained infrequent. However, English remained the language of a significant minority in nearby areas such as Maryland, Virginia, and Massachusetts.

For the further development of New Netherland Dutch it is important to distinguish between New York City and the areas along the upper Hudson and lower Mohawk rivers. English rule became definitive in 1674 and as large numbers of English speakers settled in the former Dutch territory, the pressure from English first increased in the city, where much of the Dutch-speaking population became bilingual. The year 1730, for example, saw the publication of a small schoolbook for teaching English to speakers of Dutch. This slim volume appeared in New York, where we know that the signs of imminent "language death" were evident by the mid-1700s. The first minister to preach in both Dutch and English was a bilingual Scot by the name of Archibald Laidlie (1727-79). In 1763 he made the crossing from Vlissingen to New York City to become the first English-speaking pastor in the Dutch Reformed churches in America. Thus it transpired that Dutch gradually disappeared as a cultural language that was spoken and written for ecclesiastical and administrative purposes.

In two rural areas, however, speakers maintained Dutch as a domestic language: in Bergen County in northeastern New Jersey and in the heart of eastern New York State, around the Mohawk and Hudson rivers. Both varieties resembled each other closely. In this context, the language survived for almost a century after it had died in New York City, albeit in spoken form and only for informal communication about everyday matters. James Storms (1860-1949), a native speaker of New Jersey or Bergen Dutch, noted that when he was a young boy this form of Dutch was still "the prevailing and natural form of speech in many homes of the older residents when there were no strangers present."[5]

The nature of the Mohawk-Hudson variant of *Laeg Duits* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been described by Gehring, in his study mentioned above, on the basis of written

material produced in Dutch during that period. He concludes that, where pronunciation was concerned, a remarkable amount of divergence was tolerated, but that divergence in word form was regarded as less acceptable. His study shows that the influence of English was already affecting various typically Dutch syntactic constructions. One should keep in mind that Gehring's conclusions are based on an analysis of written language, which was more closely related to written Dutch in the Netherlands than to spoken Low Dutch. This difference between written and spoken language [169]



THE
English and *Low-Dutch*
SCHOOL-MASTER.

CONTAINING

Alphabetical Tables of the moſt Common Words in *English* and *Dutch*. With certain Rules and Directions whereby the *Low-Dutch* Inhabitants of *North-America* may (in a ſhort time) learn to *Spell*, *Read*, *Underſtand* and *Speak* proper *English*. And by the help whereof the *English* may alſo learn to *Spell*, *Read*, *Underſtand* and *Write* *Low-Dutch*.

By *FRANCIS HARRISON*,
School-Maſter, in *Somerſet-County*, in *New-Jerſey*, *America*.

NEW-YORK:
Printed and Sold by *W. Bradford*. 1730.

DE
Engelſche en *Nederduytſche*
SCHOOL-MEESTER.

BEHELSENDE

Verſchydene Tafelen, na de order van *A*, *B*, in gericht van de gemeenſte Woorden, in 't *Engels* en *Duytſch*. Met eenige Regels en Onderwyſingen, waardoor de *Nederduytſche* Inwoonders van *Nort America* in korten tyt de *Engelſche* Taal mogen leeren *Spellen*, *Leeſen*, *Verſtaan* en *Spreeken*. Ende de *Engelſche* in 's gelyks mogen leeren *Spellen*, *Leeſen*, *Verſtaan* en *Schryven*, in de *Nederduytſche* Taal.

Opgeſtelt door *FRANCIS HARRISON*,
School-Meeſter, in *Somerſet-County*, in *Nieuw-Jerſy*, in *America*.

NIEUW-YORK:
Gedrukt en te Koop by *W. Bradfordt*. 1730.

Title pages of Francis Harrison (1693/4-1735), a "School-Master in Somerset-County, in New Jersey, America" published the first and only grammar written for Dutch-speaking inhabitants of Nort America in "Nieuw-Jork'.

[170] must have been considerable, as it was in the Netherlands, where a standard for written and spoken language use did not materialize until the nineteenth century. It is assumed that, due to the influence of English, New Netherland Dutch had changed considerably in the mid-eighteenth century. However, in order to reach firm conclusions, much more textual data with regard to the divergent forms in the phonological, morphological, and syntactical makeup of the language is needed. The availability of large text corpora, for example including letters written by authors without much schooling, would considerably aid further research using technological resources.

Anthony Buccini, discussing the rare accounts of Bergen Dutch, points to the noteworthy fact that this variant is still recognizable as Dutch, however much people around 1800 considered it "corrupted" (which brings us back to the experiences of the Reverend Bosch). However, Van Marle emphasizes that the ongoing influence of English must have left deeper traces, thereby giving Low Dutch a character all of its own. Thus Low Dutch, as a spoken variety of the language, did not disappear but went on to develop autonomously. As contact between the Dutch-speaking community of North America and the Netherlands quickly waned, particularly in terms of the gap between rural areas and intellectual life, there was no fresh impetus from the eighteenth-century scholars and writers in the Netherlands who were seeking to establish a standard Dutch language.

Putting Eighteenth-Century Language Description to the Test?

The first and only grammar written for Dutch-speaking inhabitants of North America was published in "Nieuw-Jork" in 1730 by the renowned printer and bookseller William Bradford: *De Engelsche en Nederduytsche School-Meester*, or in its English title, *The English and Low-Dutch Schoolmaster*. The writer of this bilingual book was Francis Harrison (1693/4-1735), who according to the title page was a "School-Master, in Somerset-County, in New-Jersey, America." Through his publication he aimed to achieve "The better Instructing of the Netherlanders, and the Dutch inhabitants of this Northern part of America in the English Tongue." In addition, the title page states that with the help of this book "the English may also learn to Spell, Read, and Understand and Write Low-Dutch." This work can therefore be characterized as a bilingual aid for Dutch learners of English and vice versa. The book's structure is traditional and synthetic, in that it starts with the "letters" and moves on to a chapter on syllables that takes up almost half of the book. The reader is provided many lists of words that consist of one or more syllables. One highly practical section contains all kinds of prayers and sample letters. Then follows an "abstract of English grammar" and [171] the entire work concludes with a "table of Names, Dutch and English."[6] However, Harrison's book provides little in the way of concrete insight into American Dutch as used around 1730. For despite his claim in "To the Reader" that he never had "any Grounds ... to the like purpose from which I might receive any furtherance or help herein," Harrison drew extensively from existing works. By far the most important source for his book was *Anglo-Belgica. d'Engelsche en Nederduytsche Academy* or *The English and Netherdutch Academy* (Amsterdam, 1677), a book for an English and Dutch readership written by English expatriate Edward Richardson: over 80 percent of the content of *De Engelsche en Nederduytsche School-Meester* is literally the same as Richardson's work, which was published half a century earlier and also features the term "Low Dutch." In short, almost the entire content of Harrison's work is taken from seventeenth-century sources. The most influential grammar in the Netherlands at the time was *Nederduitsche spraakkunst* (Dutch grammar), written by the Reverend Arnold Moonen (1644-1711). It was a bulky grammar that was published in 1706 and reprinted until the mid-eighteenth century. Yet there is no evidence that this work influenced *De Engelsche en Nederduytsche School-Meester*. The fact that contemporary grammarians from the Netherlands were working to construct a standard Dutch language, whatever the status of their endeavors, does not appear to have been a point of reference.

Harrison's work is a unique document on second-language learning. It does not, however, reflect language use among the Dutch in North America in the early eighteenth century. It simply contains seventeenth-century written language from the Dutch Republic. Nor can the process of language change be extrapolated from the book, while its rules of Dutch pronunciation do not constitute a reliable reflection of what was customary in New Jersey in the first quarter of the

eighteenth century.[7] However, the very fact that a bilingual book such as Harrison's was published, indicates that there was a need for such a work in 1730 and tells us something about the ongoing process of linguistic accommodation in which the speakers of Dutch were involved: a number of them "found it increasingly necessary to communicate in English"[8] in order to keep up with their English-speaking compatriots in terms of political and socioeconomic status.

The Literature of New Netherland: Poets and Patriots

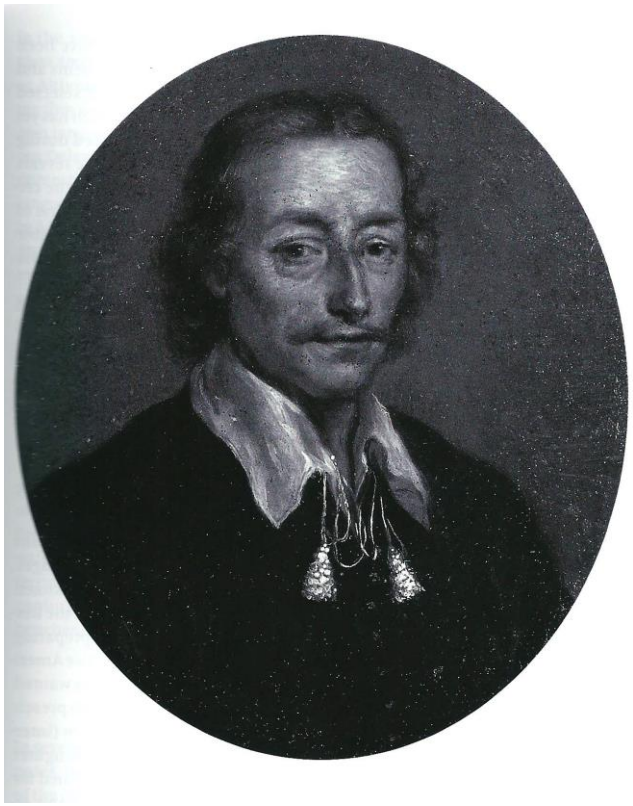
As was mentioned, the literary production of New Netherland was modest and has not been the subject of extensive research to date. The only New Netherland poetry to enter the canon consists of some verses by three seventeenth-century poets, anthologized by the American Henry Cruse Murphy (1810-82) as early as 1865. Murphy, who was minister resident for the United States in The Hague [172] from 1857 to 1861, was appointed a foreign member of Leiden's celebrated Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde (Society for Dutch language and literature) in 1858 and became an expert on Dutch history and literature. The section in his anthology only features a small number of poems, inspired by these poets' residence in parts of New Netherland.[9] The fact that part of their poetic oeuvre was created elsewhere and is devoted to other themes is described in other surveys of Dutch literature.

The best-known of the three poets is Jacob Steendam (1615-72/73), a former comforter of the sick who had already gained a certain literary reputation before he arrived in New York in 1652. Within this context, two of his poems are worthy of scrutiny. *Klacht van Nieuw-Amsterdam in Nieuw Nederlandt tot Haar Moeder* (Complaint of New Amsterdam to her mother, 1659) sums up all the advantages offered by the new colony and appeals to the Dutch motherland to come to the colony's aid. His plea appears to have fallen on deaf ears, since he repeated it in *'T Lof van Nieuw Nederland* (Praise of New Netherland, 1661), in which he emphasizes the colony's abundance in almost biblical terms. It was an effective piece of propaganda for the young colony.

Henricus Selyns (1636-1701) served as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church of Breuckelen (1660-64) and the First Reformed Church of New York City (1682-1701). In addition to Dutch poetry, he wrote verse in English and Latin. Only those poems in which Selyns wrote of a link with New Netherland are relevant to the present context, such as his *Bruydtlofs Toorts* (*Bridal Torch*, 1663). This text, which has recently been the subject of thorough literary-historical research, deals with wedding and war, and was written to mark the nuptials of the rector of the New Amsterdam Latin School, not long after a massacre "committed at Wiltwyck ... by the Indians."[10]

The third author whose poems are included in Murphy's seminal anthology is Dr. Nicasius de Sille (1610-74), a "man of no ordinary attainments in literature and science," as Murphy puts it: he came from a line of Dutch regents and had an academic background. Having arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654, he became Petrus Stuyvesant's first councilor. Later on, De Sille, a statesman through and through, acted as *schout* (sheriff) of New Amsterdam and held the positions of church warden, fire warden, and even the office of captain lieutenant for a time. When living at New Utrecht on Long Island, around 1660, he wrote *Description of the Founding or Beginning of New Utrecht*. His poem *Het Aerdtrijck spreeckt tot Syne Opquekers* (The earth speaks to its cultivators) contains a reference to New Utrecht, a place he liked very much.

While these three colonial poets have more or less entered the canon now that a selection of their poems has been included in a relatively recent anthology of seventeenth-century Dutch poetry, one looks in vain for an account of other types of literature.[11] Hardly anything coherent on American-Dutch literature [173]



Painting of Jacob Jacobsz Steendam (1615-73), poet and historian in Amsterdam, New Amsterdam and Batavia

[174] from the late seventeenth and eighteenth century appears to have been published, not even on texts for special occasions such as wedding poems and odes. Only a few rare examples of eighteenth-century poetry have been selected for study. This may be due to the fact that a sufficiently thorough search has yet to be undertaken, or to the fact that very little literature was produced during this period. A comparison between colony and homeland at this time reveals that the social context in North America was not exactly favorable for the creation of a written culture in the Dutch language and exhaustive cultivation of language. This was, on the contrary, the case in the motherland, where sociable eighteenth-century writers met in hundreds of literary societies and theater visits were commonplace.

In 1825 the Reverend Bosch, quoted above, noted of the Dutch spoken around Albany and Hoboken that “books in the language are not to be found” and this would appear to be an accurate observation, at least with regard to literary works written in this variety of Dutch. As *Laeg Duits* was exclusively a spoken language, it possessed neither a literature nor a normative grammar with a generally accepted orthography.

The Gift of Dutch

In order to maintain adequate contact with Native Americans, it was important that a number of people acquire at least some knowledge of their languages. This learning process was by no means simple. Comforter of the sick Bastiaen Jansz. Krol was "well acquainted with the language," but in 1644 he told the Reverend Johannes Megapolensis (1603-70), a learned scholar who was preparing a vocabulary of "the Makuakuaas' language," that he thought the Native Americans "changed their language every two or three years." Megapolensis wanted to learn this "very difficult language" in order to be able "to speak and to preach in it fluently."[12] We also know the names of various other *taelsmannen* (interpreters). One of them was a woman, Sara Roelofs (1627-93), the eldest daughter of the legendary New Netherland matriarch Anneke Jans.[13] Sara was famed for her extensive knowledge of Native American languages, which she probably acquired during her childhood in Rensselaerswijck, where the white settlers had contact with Native Americans on a daily basis, primarily with Mohawks and Mahicans. Later, in May 1664, she acted as an interpreter for Petrus Stuyvesant at the peace talks with the Esopus Native Americans. Unfortunately, as far as we know, she did not embark on a grammar of any of these languages. However, we do possess a "Vocabulary of the Maquas," a glossary of Mohawk, drawn up by Harmen Meyndertsz. van den Boogaert during his foray into Mohawk Country in 1634-35. This glossary forms the basis for the list that Johannes de Laet used [175] in the 1640s in his discussion with Hugo Grotius about the origins of the *gentium Americanarum*, the term he used to refer to the American peoples.[14]

Although there is scant evidence of Native Americans learning Dutch, in trading they did pick up a number of Dutch words, which they incorporated into their own language as borrowings. The languages of the Loup, Mahican, and the Munsee Delaware all contain words of recognizably Dutch origin. Most of them are domestic words and words for new items. For example, various Native American languages have adopted the Dutch word *poes* (pussycat): in Loup the word *puspus*; in Mahican *poschees* and *poschesh*, derived from the diminutive form *poesje*; and in Munsee Delaware *poosis*. Reduplication was a frequently applied morphological procedure: *kipkip* (chicken in Loup), *kuskusj* (*varken*/pig in Munsee Delaware), and *kitkit* (*kat*/cat in Mohawk). *Memekis* (Munsee Delaware for *schaap* or sheep) has a clear onomatopoetic value (see the Dutch *mekkeren*, which means to bleat). Mahican, now a dead language, borrowed *gónan* (*kool*/cabbage) and *kumkùmsch* (*komkommer*/cucumber), while Munsee Deleware borrowed *kómkòmes* (*komkommer*/cucumber) and *šelāš* (*salade*/salad). The Dutch traded *brandewijn* (brandy) with the Native Americans and this appears in Delaware as *brandywyne*.

It is widely known that the Dutch provided U.S. English with all manner of place and street names. But other Dutch elements can be found in the vocabulary of American English, words such as winkelhawk (from the Dutch *winkelhaak*), for example, in addition to better-known borrowings such as coleslaw, cookie, waffle, spook, and sleigh. The word *stoep* became stoop in American English, referring to a veranda or landing accessed by means of a narrow flight of steps. According to one American dictionary it was "formerly, a small porch with seats or benches, usually occupied by a pipe-smoking householder."

Concluding Remarks

In seventeenth-century New Netherland, Dutch was used for administrative purposes, poetry, and religion, and in some areas it continued to serve as the language of the church until the early nineteenth century. Some seventeenth-century New Netherland poets eventually came to

be included in modern Dutch anthologies, and in the first decade of the twenty-first century they have become the subject of more extensive literary analysis.

Under the strong influence of English, the spoken variant of New Netherland Dutch developed into a sui generis variety of colonial Dutch. It is an established fact, however, that evidence of the general decline of Low Dutch could be observed as early as the 1750s. A contemporary grammar of this variety has never been passed down to us and, as other contemporary descriptions of the spoken [176] language are also conspicuous by their absence, the true shape of spoken Low Dutch in the period under discussion will probably remain unknown. The structural aspects of its written counterpart have become clear from the study of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century documents. Lastly, it should be noted that, in the final quarter of the twentieth century in particular, *Laeg Duits* has received the attention it deserves from linguists both in the Netherlands and elsewhere. In the line of recent European linguistic projects such as "language from below," further historical sociolinguistic research – possibly on the basis of a corpus of surviving informal correspondence and ego documents – might shed some light on the way in which spoken eighteenth-century American Dutch was constructed, and in particular how it continued to be used in rural areas.

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[1] Jan W. de Vries, Roland Willemyns, and Peter Burger, *Het verhaal van een taal* (Amsterdam: Prometheus), 268; See also the article by Joyce D. Goodfriend, elsewhere in this volume.

[2] G.B. Bosch, "Eene zomerreis in Noordamerika. II. Albany," *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen 1827*, section 2 (*Mengelwerk*), 275-276; Jaap van Marle, "Myths and Forgeries Relating to American 'Low Dutch,' with Special Reference to *Walter Hill's Notebook*," in Margriet Bruijn Lacy et al., eds., *From* "De Halve Maen" *to KLM: 400 Years of Dutch American Exchange* (Münster: Nodus Publikationen 2008), 321.

[3] Charles Gehring, *The Dutch Language in Colonial New York: An Investigation of a Language and Its Decline and Its Relationship to Social Change* (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1973).

[4] Anthony F. Buccini, "New Netherlands Dutch, Cape Dutch, Afrikaans," *Taal en tongval*. Themanummer 9 (1996): 37. The subject of change and disappearance of American Dutch has been addressed, in recent decades, by researchers such as Buccini and Van Marle. See for example Anthony F. Buccini, "The Dialectical Origins of New Netherland Dutch," in Thomas Shannon and Johan P. Snapper, eds., *Dutch Linguistics in a Changing Europe. The Berkeley Conference on Dutch Linguistics 1993* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 211-263; Jaap van Marle, "American 'Leeg Duits' ('Low Dutch') – a neglected language," in P. Sture Ureland, ed., *Global Eurolinguistics. European Languages in North America - Migration, Maintenance and Death* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001), 79-101; See also Charles Gehring, "The Survival of the Dutch Language in New York and New Jersey," *De Halve Maen* 58.3 (October 1984): 7- 9, 24.

[5] See the introduction of James Storms, *A Jersey Dutch Vocabulary* (Park Ridge, NJ: Pascack Historical Society, 1964).

[6] For an analysis of Harrison's work, see R.A. Naborn, "NT2 in New Jersey in 1730. Francis Harrisons *De Engelsche en Nederduytsche School-Meester* nader bekeken," *Voortgang, jaarboek voor de neerlandistiek* 21 (2002): 113-142.

[7] Ibid., 134. Buccini, who was one of the few to formulate a serious response to Harrison's book and to draw conclusions on that basis with regard to pronunciation, did not recognize his Dutch source material. See Buccini, "The Dialectical Origins," passim.

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[8] Charles Th. Gehring, "Colonial Dutch," in Jacob Ernest Cooke et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the North American Colonies* (New York: Scribner, 1993), 3:21.

[9] Henry C. Murphy, *Anthology of New Netherland or Translations from the Early Dutch Poets of New York* (New York: Bradford Club, 1865. Repr. Amsterdam: N. Israel, 1966); See also Elisabeth P. Funk, "De literatuur van Nieuw-Nederland," *De Nieuwe Taalgids* 85 (1992): 383-395, and the forthcoming anthology compiled by Frans Blom, *Nieuw Nederland. Representaties in poëzie en proza*.

[10] Frans R.E. Blom, "Of Wedding and War. Henricus Selyns *Bridal Torch* (1663). Analysis, Edition, and Translation of the Dutch Poem," in Margriet Bruijn Lacy et al., eds., *From* "De Halve Maen" *to KLM. 400 Years of Dutch American Exchange* (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 2008), 185-200.

[11] Ton van Strien, ed., *Hollantsche Parnas: Nederlandse gedichten uit de zeventiende eeuw*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1997).

[12] Lois Feister, "Linguistic Communication between the Dutch and Indians in New Netherland, 1609-1664," *Ethnohistory* 20 (1973): 33.

[13] Willem Frijhoff, *Fulfilling God's Mission: The Two Worlds of Dominie Everardus Bogardus, 1607-1647* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 386-387; See also Hendrik Edelman, *Dutch-American Bibliography, 1693-1794: A Descriptive Catalog of Dutch-Language Books, Pamphlets and Almanacs Printed in America* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1974).

[14] J.A. Jacobs, "Johannes de Laet en de Nieuwe Wereld," *Jaarboek van het Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie* 50 (1996): 120.